GESELLSCHAFT FÜR BEDROHTE VÖLKER

Menschenrechtsorganisation für ethnische, rassische und religiöse Minderheiten
society for threatened peoples · association pour les peuples menacés · asociación para la defensa de los pueblos

TL 1430-23 s

Gemeinnütziger Verein

Bundesbüro:

Groner Str. 40
Postfach 2024
D-3400 Göttingen

Telefon 0551/55822-23
Teletex 5518101
Telex 175518101-GfbVGoe

Postgiro Hamburg 297793-207
Städtische Sparkasse Göttingen
Nr. 1917 (BLZ 26050001)

Statement for the East Timor Hearing

of the UN Decolonization Committee

Klemens Ludwig
Society for Threatened Peoples

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Statement for the UN Decolonization Committee

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak at the East Timor hearing of the UN Decolonization Committee. I am representing the Society for Threatened People, a German human rights organisation which dedicates its work to ethnic and religious minorities and tribal people throughout the world such as the indigenous peoples in North and South America, the Armenians and Kurds in the Near East, the Tibetans in Central Asia and many others.
But I am also a journalist and therefore I want to speak about the role of the media in the East Timor conflict. Unfortunately, I have to say that journalists, whether advertently or inadvertently, play a big role in justifying the atrocities and violations of international law committed by the Indonesians. Of course, it was not and is not easy for journalists to present realistic reports about East Timor. The Indonesian authorities do almost everything possible to make conditions for journalists very difficult in order to suppress the truth. We all know about the five Australian TV reporters Gary Cunningham, Brian Peters, Malcolm Rennie, Gregory Shackleton and Anthony Steward who were ambushed and murdered by Indonesian soldiers in East Timor even before invasion, on October 16th, 1975.
We all know about Roger East, who ignored the evacuation calls of his government in the days before the invasion on December 7th, 1975 because he wanted to support the building up of a news agency in an independent East Timor. He, too, was brutally killed by Indonesian soldiers wearing green barretts and the identification number

501 on the day of the invasion as an Australian parliamentary fact finding mission later found out.

Unfortunately, these atrocities against the six Australian journalists didn't lead to a world-wide outcry of journalists against the brutal invaders of East Timor. Instead, Indonesia started a very clever policy of rewarding with permits to East Timor those journalists who have proved to be very much in favour of Jakarta's military government. The big majority of journalists - including myself - who want to visit East Timor were and are kept out. I believe it is necessary at this point to explain that I asked for a permit to visit East Timor twice but the Indonesian authorities didn't allow me to do so. The first request went unanswered; the second was at least confirmed by the Indonesian embassy in the Federal Republic of Germany. The embassy told me to wait for the final decision that would be taken in Jakarta, but I never heard anything from there. I could mention several colleagues who had the same experiences. Some of the most prominent were William Branigin from the Washington Post, and Elizabeth Reckeweg from the United Press International who was expelled from Indonesia because of some critical articles she wrote about East Timor. Most of the journalists who received permits to visit East Timor played the game of the Indonesian military and made journalism a tool to justify genocide. Probably the most prominent among them was Barbara Crossette from the New York Times. I want to go into detail about the circumstances of her visit because she is a glaring example how well-known journalists make themselves part of dictatoria propaganda.

Barbara Crossette entered East Timor in June 1985. She was joined by three colleagues and the group was not alone. In the plane that

brought them from Kupang in West Timor to Dili, East Timor, were representatives from humanitarian aid organisations. I know them personally and they told me later about their experiences. In East Timor, the groups separated. The journalists were escorted by security forces in civilian clothes and stayed most of the time in Dili, the capital, and when they moved, they were dependent on helicopters of the Indonesian army. The representatives of the humanitarian aid organisations were able to move in jeeps overland so that they received clear impression of the massive Indonesian military presence. In an internal report, of which I have a copy, they wrote about the journalists: "Apart from us there were four foreign journalists who were invited to East Timor for the purpose of deliberate disinformation. Probably they didn't see too much of the country and most likely they were not able to speak to the ordinary people. Their attendands, more than ten people, were always busy shielding them from such contacts."

In a private conversation an official of one of the humanitarian aid organisations added some information. Both groups left East Timor in the same plane back to Indonesia. In the plane Barbara Crossette asked one of them: "Well, what is the situation really like in East Timor? I have seen nothing."

Many of us know what Barbara Crossette wrote in the New York Times on July 19th, 1985 in a front-page article. She didn't mention that the Indonesian authorities prevented her from seeing the truth. She just wrote what the Indonesians wanted to read: That she had witnessed the progress brought to East Timor by Indonesia. How cynical and opportunistic when we happen to know the real background!

There are many similar examples, but I only want to mention two more: In September 1987 a German TV team was able to visit East Timor. The visit was made possible by Father Rudiger, also known as "Roger" Seifert, a German priest who spent many years in Jakarta and regards himself as a close friend of the Indonesian Minister of Defense, Benny Murdani. Seifert has stated openly his intention to correct the picture of the Indonesian occupation that has been drawn by highly respected human rights organisations like Amnesty International (recipient of the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize) and the Society for Threatened People. Therefore the German TV team, including the Asian correspondent Manfred Rohde, seemed to be a good opportunity for Father Seifert to show a broader public, the so-called progress in East Timor. The circumstances of the visit were the same as in the case of Barbara Crossette. The journalists, three of them together, were accompanied by members of the Indonesian secret service; they only moved in helicopters and therefore had no chance to speak to ordinary people. The results were also the same. In an interview with the newspaper Jakarta Post, published on October 2nd 1987, Rohde said: "We witnessed immense progress in East Timor. Before we only learned about this region from our readings but now we can witness the province ourselves. The government really has focused their attention on this province and development can be seen everywhere". He added that with this visit he would be able to inform the world about what is really going on in the "province". Unfortunately for Rohde, the broadcasting network didn't see things in such a one-sided manner. A different team was sent to Lisbon in order to interview refugees, who draw a completely dif-

ferent picture of the situation in their homeland. So when the film was finally broadcast last month, it was a rather well-balanced report - very different from the original intention of Manfred Rohde "to inform the world what is really going on in the province".

In the cases of Rohde and Crossette, there is at least one reason that makes their behaviour somewhat understandable.

Both are foreign correspondents based in Singapore and Bangkok and in order to cover Indonesia at all -as they must- they are dependent on the goodwill of the Indonesian authorities. It is hard to be a South East Asia correspondent if the authorities of the region's major nation will not allow you to enter their country ! So a journalist needs a lot of backbone to resist the Indonesian government. Ironically enough, Barbara Crossette was expelled from Indonesia twice almost a year after her visit to East Timor because her main editor was highly critical of the Suharto regime.

The last journalist I want to mention is not a correspondent in the region and yet he operated on much lower principles than Crossette or Rohde. He is the Portuguese journalist and publisher of the weekly newspaper Tempo, Nuno Rocha. He was in East Timor last year for about 24 hours, he didn't leave Dili and the whole trip was arranged by Indonesia's foreign minister at that time, Mochtar Kusumaatmadja. To make a long story short, the endless articles Nuno Rocha published seem to be nearly identical with statements of the Indonesian government. One can only guess at the motives of such a journalist.

To summarize: We live in a world that has become very small

thanks to modern media and transport techniques. In theory, nothing can happen, no matter how remote a place may be , that can be hidden from the public. This seems to be good news for human rights advocates because publicity can be an important step in the prevention of human rights violations. It is a big part of the East Timor tragedy, that this is not necessarily true. The regime that is responsible for the atrocities in East Timor made skillful use of the media. And the media itself, or at least parts of it, have often done more to disguise and to distort the situation than to inform the public. Therefore, whether because of incompetence or by design, the media have become an accomplice of human rights violators. As a journalist, this is a most sad conclusion for me to reach.

But I am not totally pessimistic. The case of East Timor shows that there are also journalists, who refuse to play the game of the dictators even when they have to pay for it; sometimes even with their lives.

What we need is a code of honor for journalists that prevents them from becoming tools of one regime or another. Perhaps the United Nations can help to initiate discussion of such a code.

Thank you very much for your interest.